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EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE
Thursday, March 9, 2006
10:35 a.m. ET

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Dramatic Changes in U.S. Aging Highlighted in New Census, NIH Report

Impact of Baby Boomers Anticipated

The face of aging in the United States is changing dramatically — and rapidly, according to a new U.S. Census Bureau report, commissioned by the National Institute on Aging (NIA). Today's older Americans are very different from their predecessors, living longer, having lower rates of disability, achieving higher levels of education and less often living in poverty. And the baby boomers, the first of whom celebrated their 60th birthdays in 2006, promise to redefine further what it means to grow older in America.

The report, *65+ in the United States: 2005*, was prepared for NIA, a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to provide a picture of the health and socioeconomic status of the aging population at a critical time in the maturing of the United States. It highlights striking shifts in aging on a population scale and also describes changes at the local and even family level, examining, for example, important changes in family structure as a result of divorce.

“The collection, analysis, and reporting of reliable data are critical to informing policy as the nation moves ahead to address the challenges and opportunities of an aging population,” says NIA Director Richard J. Hodes, M.D. “This report tells us that we have made a lot of progress in improving the health and well-being of older Americans, but there is much left to do.”

Among the trends:

- *The United States population aged 65 and over is expected to double in size within the next 25 years.* By 2030, almost 1 out of every 5 Americans — some 72 million people — will be 65 years or older. The age group 85 and older is now the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population.
- *The health of older Americans is improving. Still, many are disabled and suffer from chronic conditions.* The proportion with a disability fell significantly from 26.2 percent in 1982 to 19.7 percent in 1999. But 14 million people age 65 and older reported some level of disability in Census 2000, mostly linked to a high prevalence of chronic conditions such as heart disease or arthritis.
- *The financial circumstances of older people have improved dramatically, although there are wide variations in income and wealth.* The proportion of people aged 65 and older in poverty decreased from 35 percent in 1959 to 10 percent in 2003, mostly attributed to the support of Social Security. In 2000, the poorest fifth of senior households had a net worth of \$3,500 (\$44,346 including home equity) and the wealthiest had \$328,432 (\$449,800 including home equity).
- *Geographically, Florida (17.6 percent), Pennsylvania (15.6 percent) and West Virginia (15.3 percent) are the “oldest” states, with the highest percentages of people aged 65 and older.* Charlotte County, Fla. (34.7 percent) gets top honors among counties, and McIntosh County, N.D. (34.2 percent) ranks second.
- *Higher levels of education, which are linked to better health, higher income, more wealth and a higher standard of living in retirement, will continue to increase among people 65 and older.* The proportion of Americans with at least a bachelor's degree grew five-fold from 1950 to 2003, from 3.4 percent to 17.4 percent, and by 2030, more than one-fourth

of the older population is expected to have an undergraduate degree. The percentage completing high school quadrupled between 1950 and 2003, from 17.0 percent to 71.5 percent.

- *As the United States as a whole grows more diverse, so does the population aged 65 and older.* In 2003, older Americans were 83 percent non-Hispanic White, 8 percent Black, 6 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Asian. By 2030, an estimated 72 percent of older Americans will be non-Hispanic White, 11 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Black and 5 percent Asian.
- *Changes in the American family have significant implications for future aging.* Divorce, for example, is on the rise, and some researchers suggest that fewer children and more stepchildren may change the availability of family support in the future for people at older ages. In 1960, only 1.6 percent of older men and 1.5 percent of women aged 65 and older were divorced. But by 2003, 7 percent of older men and 8.6 percent of older women were divorced and had not remarried. The trend may be continuing. In 2003, among people in their early 60s, 12.2 percent of men and 15.9 percent of women were divorced.

“The social and economic implications of an aging population — and of the baby boom in particular — are likely to be profound for both individuals and society,” says Census Bureau Director Louis Kincannon. “*The 65+ in the United States* report helps us to understand these dramatic changes so we can examine how they may impact families and society.”

The 65+ report is a project of the NIA’s Behavioral and Social Research Program, which supports the collection and analyses of data in several national and international studies on health, retirement, and aging. The program’s director, Richard M. Suzman, Ph.D., suggests that, with five years to go before the baby boom turns 65, “Many people have an image of aging that may be 20 years out of date. The very current portrait presented here shows how much has changed and where trends may be headed in the future.”

65+ lead author, Victoria A. Velkoff, Ph.D., chief of the Aging Studies Branch at the U.S. Census Bureau, noted the variations among today’s older adults and those of the future. “People 65 and over are a very diverse group. How they experience aging depends on a variety of interacting factors — from gender and race/ethnicity to health, education, socioeconomic and family circumstances. *65+ in the United States: 2005* depicts this heterogeneity, which will further expand as this population doubles in size over the next 25 years.”

The report was prepared by Dr. Velkoff and co-authors Wan He, Ph.D., Manisha Sengupta, Ph.D., and Kimberly A. DeBarros of the Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau.

The 243-page compendium examines in detail five key areas: growth of the older population (changes in age and racial/ethnic composition), longevity and health (life expectancy and causes of death), economic characteristics (income and household wealth), geographic distribution (by population and race) and social and other characteristics (marital status, living arrangements and voting patterns).

The report covers a wide range of topics and timelines, pulling together data from Census 2000 and previous censuses, nationally representative surveys and recent population projections. In addition to the data compiled by other federal agencies, including the National Center for Health Statistics and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the report also includes statistics from the Current Population Survey; American Housing Survey; National Health Interview Survey; National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey; Survey of Income and Program Participation; and the Health and Retirement Study.

The public can view and also download the report at <http://www.census.gov>.

To view an appendix of selected highlights from *65+ in the United States: 2005*, please see <http://www.nia.nih.gov/NewsAndEvents/PressReleases/PR2006030965PlusReport.htm>.

The Census Bureau serves as the leading source of quality data about the nation's people and economy. For more information, visit the Census Bureau website at www.census.gov.

The NIA is the lead federal agency conducting and supporting basic, biomedical and behavioral and social research on aging and the special needs and problems of older people. For more information, visit the NIA website at www.nia.nih.gov or call toll free 1-800-222-2225.

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